THE VAN ZANT DINNER

By SANDRA ALEXANDER

AS well as I knew Harrison Evans, and my knowledge of him was a matter of years and not months, I rarely had occasion to talk with him. We were fortunate enough to publish all of his novels and a book of his plays, but my position at the tail end of our firm's signature gave the intimacy of his acquaintanceship to my father and elder brother rather than to me. This was my ill luck until I chanced to cross to England with him in February, where he was to attend the London *première* of his new play, and I to patch up an unhappy mess with our English representatives. We met daily in the ship's smoking-room.

To this day I do not believe the Van Zants exist, or ever existed, for that matter, outside of the mind of that intelligent weaver of tales who sat opposite me at the little table in that smoke-wreathed room. I do not know how the story started. Perhaps the Scotch furnished the introduction ; it was old and mellow enough to have done so. But Evans was fairly launched before I had oriented myself.

" When I first fell heir to the card," he was saying, " fifteen years ago, my wife told me that her mother had been at a finishing school with the Van Zants' daughter. Like the children of a certain English king, this girl had the misfortune to drown while crossing the English Channel. The Van Zants took it very hard. They seldom enough went out before, but after that they were never known to appear at a social function of any sort. They simply retired from the world, and their infrequent visitors came in response to a royal summons. In our case the royal summons was in the shape of an invitation to dinner—sent two weeks in advance. It was engraved upon thick, creamy pasteboard and it read, as nearly as I remember,—I still have some of those cards,—' Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius Tuyle Van Zant request the pleasure of '—blank space filled in by the hand of Mr Van Zant's octogenarian secretary—' Mr. and Mrs. Harrison Evans' company at dinner on the evening,'—another blank space,—and then the hour—' eight o'clock '—engraving once more. Mark that—the hour was engraved, proving conclusively that Mr. and Mrs. Van Zant attached enough importance to their dinner-hour to have it cast once and for all into imperishable copper-plate.

" My wife assured me that I would hate it. She said she used to pray for a touch of influenza whenever she fished the card out of the letter-box. It had been coming to them once a year, in the season between Christmas and Lent, ever since she could remember. Her mother invariably hired a cab, and they drove up in state, while she rebelled all the way. She objected to going and she objected to the price of the cab. She wound up by telling me that we'd have to go and carry on the tradition.

" She did me grave injustice. I hadn't the slightest intention of staying away. The yearly invitation seemed to me a touch of pretty sentiment. I fairly visualised the delightful old couple and their kindness of heart that led them year after year to do this gracious act, first to the friend of their dead daughter and her child, and then to the impecunious and struggling young literary man the child had married. I remember, as the day grew nearer, I seriously considered renting dress clothes, but my wife dissuaded me. It seemed the dinner in the past had meant extra expense and doing without something that she really wanted, and she didn't propose it should any longer. To my suggestion that we take a cab she likewise turned a deaf ear. We could go on the street car."

Evans stopped, and sipped his high-ball, his eyes twinkling at me across the table.

" The car crept uptown by way of Madison Avenue," he went on after a moment. " We planned to disembark at the cross street nearest the Van Zant house on Park Avenue and walk the rest of the way. House "—Evans paused again reflectively—" house doesn't seem quite the right word to apply to the structure that sheltered my wife's old friends. The brown stone pile appeared to me to be somewhat smaller than the Museum of Natural History, yet at the same time it presented all the cordiality of that public building. It stood behind a breast-high stone wall, and we entered through a pair of handsome pierced iron gates. The windows—literally, there seemed to be hundreds of them—were shrouded in layers of lace and emitted a faint illumination. The front doors were multiple. An ancient butler saw us safely through them into the main hall, and a powdered footman took my overcoat and derby hat. An elderly maid came to lead Nancy back to some hidden dressing-room.

II

" I examined the hall with some interest. I was to become very familiar with it in time. Decorators had already begun to go in for white-and-black marble tile foyers, Mr. Aubrey Beardsley's drawings, and Chinese brocades ; but the Van Zants, it was plain to be seen, were still in the period of Mr. Charles Dickens. The panelling was carved black walnut and reached to the ceiling ; velvet hung festooned at windows and doorways. To the right were heavy folding-doors, and opposite a mammoth mottled marble mantelpiece. Over this tremendous ornament of the eighteen eighties branched a pair of elk horns. The floor was covered to the baseboard with wine-coloured velvet carpet, and it, in turn, was strewn with Oriental rugs. I was studying them with rapture when Nancy returned, and the butler led us to the drawing-room door. He opened it and announced our names in a voice that died away before it reached the little group at the end of it.

" As we started down the length of that enormous double room, it began to dawn upon me what my wife had meant when she said I should hate

the Van Zant function. She meant it was stuffy. She was right. Stuffiness rolled over me in an ever increasing wave. The depth of the carpet pile, the shrouded windows, the dull twinkle of the lights, the dwarfed reflection of our figures in the full-length mirrors—all intensified the feeling. The quiet was unbelievable. The hurried and anxious roar of the town outside had been entrapped and wrapped around with octupus tentacles of velvet and smothered in Brussels lace. Our advance partook of all the qualities of Kipling's nightmare—' the bellying of the curtain kept me always in one place.' It seemed to my drugged senses that we were doomed to sink our feet deeper and deeper in that carpet and never to progress.

" But the nightmare came to an end presently in front of a bright fire of cannel-coal, and a round little woman got up from a satin arm-chair and murmured, ' Dear child ! ' in my wife's direction. Nancy breathed, ' Dear Mrs. Van Zant ! ' in her turn, and kissed the cheek presented to her.

" ' And this is my husband, dear Mrs. Van Zant.' Mrs. Van Zant offered her hand. It was a little round cushion of a hand. I solemnly pressed it. ' And how are you, dear Mr. Van Zant ? May I present my husband ? ' Mr. Van Zant grunted, whether it was to express the state of his health or his willingness to make my acquaintance I had no way of knowing. A thin, bird-like woman, whose gentility was evident in every bead on her gown, proved to be ' dear Miss Culver,' and then ' dear Doctor Sciple ' came in for a share of Nancy's sweetness, and the introductions were over. We selected chairs and sank down into a soft, warm silence.

" It was very evident that our host and hostess had made an exhausting effort in greeting us, and their guests plainly lacked the temerity to venture upon conversation. Miss Culver—Nancy told me afterward she had been the daughter's governess—sat in approved cultivated pose, her back rigid, her ankles crossed, and one hand grasping the wrist of the other in her glittering lap. Doctor Sciple went quite the other extreme in relaxing and overflowing his chair ; my heart warmed toward him. ' Dear ' Mr. and Mrs. Van Zant were as alike as the traditional two peas in stoutness. I don't think I had ever seen in all my life two people so richly adipose. The greatest difference between them was that Mrs. Van Zant's maid, with the help of an hour-glass corset, had contrived to divide her mistress's figure in two parts, upper and lower ; but Mr. Van Zant, proving the superiority of the male species, had comfortably let his go all in one piece. They had the same amount of double chins, and the same little eyes that expressed nothing when they looked at you—nothing except content with themselves and everything that was theirs.

" I sat considering them. My wife's face had its far-away expression ; I knew she was probably planning the next day's dinner. We kept no cook in those days. I stifled a yawn. I made mental bets with myself as to who would make the first opening. I guessed Miss Culver, but I was wrong. It was Doctor Sciple. Nancy also told me afterward that Doctor Sciple was the family physician. You see, we were invited to meet the family governess and the family doctor. The Van Zants slew at one stroke

their obligations to four objects of charity. It was a very good idea ; I was struck with it. But Nancy resented it bitterly.

" Well, to go back, Doctor Sciple roused himself and remarked in his best bedside manner,—I knew it was his bedside manner, because, poor man, he'd lost all the others,—' It looked very much like rain as I came in.' It was a very unfortunate choice. I could have told him as much myself, and this was my first visit, while he had probably been coming for the last thirty years. ' You've made a mistake, old boy,' I thought. I was right, too ; the little group agitated itself to a marked degree. Mr. Van Zant moved his head several times and said : ' What's that ? What's that ? ' I learned, as time went on, that he wasn't deaf in the least degree, —he didn't bother to listen.

" Doctor Sciple coughed. Great timidity marked his next statement about the probability of rain. It was evident he wished he had picked one of the other openings. Mr. Van Zant understood it this time and didn't approve of it. Mrs. Van Zant murmured, ' Tut ! tut ! ' exactly what one would have thought she would murmur at anything. Miss Culver delicately tapped her foot and stonily looked at her knees. Doctor Sciple seemed more frightened than ever. He might easily have posed for the Rabbit at the Queen's garden party.

" Mr. Van Zant wedged himself from his chair and stood over us. ' Caroline,'—he boomed it,—' I told you we would have to order out the horses.' Caroline clucked her commiserating ' Tut ! tut ! ' once more, and her round, pink face puckered in great distress. The rest of us were silent ; we had no suggestion to offer. I could see the horses ; they were as round and fat and well fed as their masters, the brougham was without a speck of dust, and the harness shone like precious jewels. There would be a coachman and footman well on in the middle fifties, and they were round and well fed, were probably having their dinner in the servants' hall at that moment. It would be tragic to have them out.

" No one seemed to have the slightest suggestion to make ; plainly it was beyond the ability of any one present to cope with the situation. Then Nancy spoke to Mrs. Van Zant. She said, ' Dear Mrs. Van Zant, why not send and find out whether it is raining or not ? ' ' What's that ? ' Mr. Van Zant turned to her. Nancy repeated her suggestion in exactly the same tone of voice. ' Yes, yes, Cornelius,' and Cornelius considered it from all its many angles, and then plowed over and rang the bell.

" While we waited, the tension enormously grew. Doctor Sciple seemed to feel his disgrace keenly ; no one looked at him. Miss Culver was endeavouring to appear detached. In all this time she had not changed the position of her hands by the fraction of an inch. The string of her poise was stretched so tightly, one could almost hear it vibrate.

" The footman came back. He reported the weather fair ; the stars were out. We relaxed. Mr. Van Zant favoured Doctor Sciple with a walrus look, sank back in his chair, and abandoned his watch-fob seals, while a beatific smile spread itself over Mrs. Van Zant's soft creases. ' Now, you

see, Cornelius,' she said in soft triumph, ' we won't have to have the horses, out, after all.' Turning to Nancy she kindly explained, ' Mr. Van Zant was afraid we would have to have the horses out, my dear.' Nancy nodded understandingly and would not meet my eye."

Evans paused. " My dear fellow, can you see them ? "

" Yes." I said. " I should say I could. Marvellous, absolutely ripping—but I don't believe in them."

" Oh, you will," he assured me ; " you will before I'm done."

He helped himself to a fresh cigarette ; then he went on :

" Dinner was announced in time to save anyone else from further blunder. I had not uttered a word. Here was something entirely unexpected and precious. It so far surpassed my expectation that I could have hugged myself with joy of it. It really was too good to believe—a brand-new impression so perfectly fresh and unspoiled that I was actually afraid to breathe on it. The Van Zants and their atmosphere were as solid, as shapely, and as transparent as a block of ice.

" They belonged to thirty years back. They had been preserved, so I fondly told myself, in all their original juices, for my especial benefit. And surely no one was more capable of enjoying them. Time and time again I have seriously considered putting them into a book, but I've never done it. I grew fond of them, for one thing. In spite of their insufferable condescension, their ghastly snobbishness, and their unalterable opinion that trade of any sort, most of the professions, including that of literature, was ' low,' I could never bring myself to put them down.

" To get back once more. We went in to dinner. I bore the genteel Miss Culver on my arm. The dining-room was as overheated, as heavily upholstered, and fully as oppressive as the drawing-room. The table was round and immense. It was covered with a heavily incrusted cloth ; there were five forks, four knives, and three sets of spoons at each place, four wine-glasses, and a silver goblet for water. The centre of the table was banked around a flat mirror with pink roses and Roman hyacinths, and there was a large circle of candles casting their reflection in the pseudo-miniature lake.

" We seated ourselves according to the crested place cards, and I took up the menu with interest. I noted we were offered a choice of thick or clear soup ; everything was on the same lavish scale. I congratulated myself as I ran over the list of seasonable and unseasonable delicacies. There was terrapin, procured heaven knows how ; canvasbacks, with their attendant hominy, celery, and currant jelly ; an English roast, huge and oppressive. I don't need to refresh my mind ; every item of that two-hour dinner stands out in my memory like an electric sign on Broadway. And, as a matter of fact, we had, with slight variation, the identical things throughout the entire time we dined with the Van Zants. There was a pheasant pie, French artichokes, asparagus, Bar-le-Duc strawberries ; and between one of the courses a compôte of fresh pears in champagne was put down to tempt our fagged appetites. Never had I imagined such a feast.

" The wines—you'll not believe me, but the champagne served from the fish to the roast was a vintage of ninety-two ! I know, because upon this point Mr. Van Zant made himself very clear. His statement, as he held his glass up to the light, conveyed the only audible and intelligent remark he had made since we had left the drawing-room. Throughout the entire dinner my glass was being constantly replenished, with a very superlative *vin ordinaire*, and when we had reached the Camembert cheese stage, a Romanee Conti Burgundy that shone in its etched glasses like light from the Grail, replaced everything else. When the ladies had left us, decanters of port were placed on the bare table, and a crested silver box, cedar lined, with part of an apple cunningly concealed in its top, were put within our easy reach."

Evans smiled reflectively. " Just imagine all this put down before a poverty-stricken scribbler who was making, perhaps, all told, fifteen hundred a year. At that time our domestic arrangements were of the sketchiest. We had a small apartment on East 29th Street. Nancy prepared our breakfasts and delicatessen dinners, and we lunched at various restaurants in the neighbourhood of wherever we happened to be. But to go back to that first dinner.

" There was no general conversation. The six of us sat in unbroken silence. Nancy, at her end of the table, did make an effort to distract Mr. Van Zant, and he favoured her with a few grunts between his suspicious peerings into huge silver dishes that the butler uncovered for his inspection before he turned them over to the footmen to take to the side-tables and parcel out to us. Once a dish did not look up to the mark, and there was a lifted fork and a low rumble. The butler bent his head and deigned to murmur a few words in his master's ear, and the course of the dinner was unchecked. I sat on Mrs. Van Zant's left. The post of honour was given to Doctor Sciple by reason of his heavier standing. Nancy and Miss Culver shared in like manner Mr. Van Zant. Miss Culver, I was interested to note, had turned down her first wine-glass, and no further effort was made to serve her. Doctor Sciple, Mr. Van Zant, and I went steadily along without refusals. Mr. Van Zant frequently consoled himself with second helpings, sufficient proof, if we had needed any, that this was in no way a formal affair. As course succeeded entrée, and entrée, course, I began to crave a cigarette, but I dared not light one. Doctor Sciple surreptitiously helped himself, under cover of a cough, to a small pink pellet taken from an object that resembled a round silver watch, which he took from his waistcoat pocket.

" Miss Culver picked daintily at the food of her plate. Nancy frankly gave up somewhere between the roast and salad. She told me later that she had always done so. I was rapidly becoming quite stuffed. Breathing became difficult, and I knew why it was that no one talked.

" Mrs. Van Zant murmured first to Doctor Sciple and then to me in half-hour intervals. She asked me if I had heard the new star Emma Eames, and then, without waiting for my reply, she told me she understood that

there was a new impresario at the Metropolitan—a Mr. Gatti-Casazza. I said gravely that it was undoubtedly true. Once she kindly asked if I enjoyed my work. ' It is a newspaper, isn't it ? ' I said I did enjoy it. Then she said something further to the effect that newspaper work must be very fatiguing. Did I not find it fatiguing ? Doctor Sciple heard some of this and looked up from his hot artichokes to tell me he had always understood that newspaper men were extremely loyal to their journals. To this illuminating remark I ventured, by way of a reply, to set up a distinction : I was not, in the exact sense, a newspaper man.

" ' Really ? ' said Doctor Sciple, suspiciously. ' I understood from your wife that you were connected with *The Post* '. "

" ' I am,' I hastened to assure him. Mrs. Van Zant's mouth was beginning to pucker distressfully. ' I do write for *The Post*, Sunday articles usually, but I am in no way connected with the staff ; and so—' I remember I floundered still a little longer before Mrs. Van Zant said, ' But you do write for a newspaper, don't you, Mr. Evans ? ' I saw myself fairly trapped, and I weakened to " Yes.' ' Then you might be said to call yourself a newspaper man, since you write for one ? ' she stolidly pointed out. I admitted that I might. Any explanation I could have made would have been a distinction without a difference. The subject was dropped. Thereafter in both Mrs. Van Zant's mind and Doctor Sciple's would rest a suspicion that for some dark and nefarious purpose I had attempted to cover up my calling.

III

" By now you will have noticed what I discovered early in our acquaintance, that the Van Zants, by reason of the swaddling with which they had surrounded themselves, and their age, were utterly unable to change any of their preconceived opinions or ideas. Once they received a fact, it was forever sealed in its pristine state within their consciousness. No sort of operation could remove it or change it in any degree. They showed this by signs of distress on Mrs. Van Zant's part and anger on Mr. Van Zant's. It was hopeless to tell them anything, for by curiously distorted logic they entrapped you and led you complacently back to your starting-point. In those fifteen years there were never any arguments at that dinner-table. Books, music, the theatres were seldom, if ever, mentioned. They had all ceased to exist when the Van Zants had ceased to notice them. The conversation rarely varied. Mr. Van Zant grunted at Nancy, and Mrs. Van Zant asked me if I enjoyed my work and if newspapers weren't ' fatiguing.' The state of the weather came in for a large share of notice, and with the brandy and cigars Mr. Van Zant told a long and involved anecdote that had to do with an Irishman and a Scotsman. He leaned back in the black walnut chair that tightly encased him, his huge stomach covered in stiff white linen and black broadcloth, encompassed by a gold chain. His chins waggled when he talked, and clutched in one fat, gouty hand he held a thin and elegant cigar.

" As time passed, their eyes beamed with something akin to recognition and fondness as we came down the drawing-room towards them. It may not have been fondness. I gave it considerable thought; I believe the word ' usedness ' would fit the case more nearly. They became used to us, and for that reason liked us. They never failed to send the engraved card with the dinner invitation upon it at exactly the same season of the year, and Nancy and I always went. The company never changed. Doctor Sciple continued to take his pink pellets during dinner, Miss Culver, growing thinner and darker as time went by, still picked delicately at the twelve-course dinners that were offered us. The Van Zants grew older so slowly that we hardly noticed it from one year to the next. The war was fought, and its head-lines faded from the papers, but no change was apparent at the Van Zants'.

" Things, however, did not stand so still for Nancy and me. I published a book, my first; perhaps you remember it. It did fairly well, and we moved away from 29th Street to an apartment in Gramercy Park. Our eldest son was born. Nancy did talk to Mrs. Van Zant of baby-clothes and croup, I remember, and she and the baby received donations of roses and hothouse grapes for several weeks.

" I did another novel and then a play. Our second boy was born, and we decided to move to the country. We bought the small place we have now on the sound. We also got an automobile.

" It was about this time that Nancy conceived the idea of having the Van Zants to dinner. I think possessing a butler of her own must have gone to her head. It took me two years entirely to dissuade her. I pointed out that it would spoil everything. What possible good could it do any one except herself to have them dine with us? Why ruin an unique situation, which, if carefully nursed, would give us unbounded joy, for the satisfaction of showing them our set of Sèvres china and our less ornate damask?

" Finally, she gave up her plan to get even with them, and consented to regard the Van Zants in the light of a priceless boon. Her observation of the phenomenon became heightened. If anything escaped me, she was there to remind me that such-and-such had happened. It was she who noticed that Duganne, the Van Zant butler, had been replaced by some one who looked enough like him to be his twin. We never inquired for Duganne, but we mourned him.

" Our first automobile had been replaced by a closed car, and the gardener on the place drove us into town to any social functions we wished to attend. We agreed that it would never do to shock Duganne by driving up and alighting from our motor. So, much to our chauffeur's mystification, we alighted around the corner and trudged on foot to the door and Duganne's kindly ministrations.

" Nancy made it a rule to wear all of her oldest and dowdiest evening gowns. She did allow me a dinner jacket. It passed unnoticed. We might have appeared in burnoose and turbans; the Van Zants never really saw us. That is, they never saw us until the grand disaster."

Evans leaned forward and pushed the little bell in the wainscoting that summoned the steward.

" What will you have ? " he said, turning back to me.

" The same," I replied. And, accordingly, our glasses were replenished. After a moment he went on again :

" There were no perceptible changes, as I have said before. Yes, once, I believe, Miss Culver did stay away—grippe. On that occasion the Van Zants were completely lost. They couldn't have been more so if they had been set down in the subway and left to find their way home. Mrs. Van Zant fluttered and murmured, ' Poor dear Miss Culver ! ' Mr. Van Zant was heard to wheeze that she was ' a dam' fine woman.' Doctor Sciple added a token of his respect, and Nancy and I hung our memorial wreath beside it. She was back the following winter, and once again the tradition was perfected.

" After a meagre little acquaintance of six years, Mr. Van Zant addressed me pleasantly as ' my boy.' He continued to do this as my hair thinned on top and finally disappeared entirely. I developed considerable embonpoint, but I was still ' my boy ' until the very end. Nancy grew stouter, and her hair grey ; but to Mrs. Van Zant she was still ' dear child ' and our children's ailments were inquired into as though they were still in the nursery.

" Nancy and I began to feel that this state of affairs was to last forever, since time and death still continued to show the Van Zants proper respect. But everything comes to an end sooner or later, as has already been pointed out by some keen observer.

" In 1919 —I know the exact date,—one cold January night we goloshed around the corner from where we had left the car and yielded ourselves to the Van Zant menials. When we were admitted to the drawing-room we were overcome to find a stranger added to our party. A middle-aged and slightly grizzled Englishman had joined our circle around the fire. The Van Zants were excited to the point of good manners, Miss Culver was positively twittering, and Doctor Sciple was booming out platitudes in his best bedside voice. The gentleman proved to be Colonel Aubrey Gayles-worth, son of a gentleman of title who had known the Van Zants in the old days when they did a little globe-trotting. Mr. Van Zant told several reminiscent tales of having shot on his lordship's moor and of stays in his lordship's castle. The colonel was over on an inspection trip, and incidentally to transact a little business in connection with the embassy at Washington. He had brought a letter from his father, and the Van Zants were doing the proper thing by him.

" He was a very pleasant-looking chap ; the hale and British sportsman shone from his ruddy face. I could see that Nancy wished she had worn a newer gown. I sat back and watched. The Van Zants were about to die an apopolectic death in their endeavour to keep up with him. He was enthusiastic about New York. He plainly felt that his interest would be appreciated, and he plied the Van Zants with questions. He particularly

admired the Woolworth Tower. It developed that our hosts had never seen it. He spoke of the aquarium, compared it in glowing terms with the more famous one at Monte Carlo. The Van Zants had never been there, but had a suspicion it was at Battery Park. 'Oh, yes, the Battery, surely.' Mrs. Van Zant said it was a delightful place to drive, the water was so pretty. The colonel went on to Broadway; how many theatres did we have now? I supplied this bit of information. 'Really?' It was too remarkable! 'And the Follies!' But the Van Zants had given up long ago; they couldn't follow him there. 'The hotels, rippin', simply rippin'.

"Dinner was announced, and we all got up with evident relief. Our hosts could not be expected to be catechised while anything so sacrosanct as food was before them. Their wish to please their guests, their nervousness, and their entire inability to cope with the situation were very amusing and at the same time a little pathetic. I trembled for them and I suffered as we arranged ourselves round the table.

"Dinner went on as always. The colonel ate heartily and praised the ducks. Mr. Van Zant told him his steward had been in his service forty-five years. After this heroic effort to be entertaining he abandoned his guest for the issue in hand. The colonel fell to Nancy, and she filled in the gap in her best fashion. I rather envied him from my place between Miss Culver and Doctor Sciple. We dragged on until the dessert, and then Mrs. Van Zant retrieved her train and got heavily to her feet. At this signal the ladies, as they had done for years, rose to follow her. Nancy went reluctantly, I could see that. She knew the sanctity of this custom had been ripped away. The colonel gallantly replaced one of the powdered flunkeys at the door and bowed them out.

"We seated ourselves once more, this time grouped at Mr. Van Zant's end of the table. The cloth was removed, and the port and cigars were passed. The colonel regretted Nancy's going, I could also see that. He regarded us in turn, evidently speculating as to which of the three might furnish him with some new information or impression. Mr. Van Zant was endeavouring to clip the end of a cigar, and his fingers, stiff and swollen with his ancient enemy, were pitifully slow. He hardly seemed a likely source. Doctor Sciple was as equally absorbed extracting a pink pellet. He settled on me.

"I had always made it a rule to avoid any discussions under that roof which might let the glare of modernity into the Van Zant tomb. Naturally, I prepared for his onset with apprehension.

"'I wonder now if Harrison Evans, the novelist, you know, is a member of your family. We think so highly of him in England.'

"'My name is Harrison Evans,' I replied in a tone that I endeavoured to make as little fatuous as possible.

"'Oh, I say, now—well, really now, this is a happy chance.' He hitched his chair nearer mine and was immediately in full flood. 'Just before I left London I saw your play *Beachcombers*; a bully thing it is, too. Don't think I ever saw an ending that did me in so—' He rose to a tidal

wave; you know the sort of thing socially apt people pour out on even the most obscure of us.

"Doctor Sciple was weightily interested in all this. He was making noble efforts at readjustment. Presently he plunged in with, 'I thought you were connected in some way with one of our metropolitan journals, Evans?' It was my chance to settle that ancient score, but I let the opening pass and mumbled a negative. 'So you write books? I congratulate you,' he went on in the same light elephantine manner.

"'Is it possible you did not know?' Colonel Gaylesworth asked him.

"Doctor Sciple rounded a full period with the information that he had been re-reading Bulwer-Lytton for the last few years, and so hadn't an opportunity to get into the moderns very much. The colonel's eye alighted next upon Mr. Van Zant; he was about to demand a tribute from him. But Mr. Van Zant forestalled him. He stood up with the help of the table and said, 'We will join the ladies in the drawing-room.' That was all. This was no fitting time to deal with me; I understood and agreed with him.

"We were a very disorganised group as we descended to our coffee. Nancy regarded us with suppressed questions in her eyes. As soon as the colonel had received his cup from Mrs. Van Zant's hand he made for her and told her he had just discovered he had been spending the evening in the same room with Harrison Evans and did not know it until a few minutes ago. Nancy cast one appalled and fleeting glance at me and then at Mr. Van Zant's suffused face before she yielded herself up to him.

"It was too late now for regrets. I drank my coffee and looked at the tragedy from every angle. I had stupidly let myself be carried along upon a sea of adulation while the Van Zants had been betrayed before my eyes. It was tragic. What was more, it smacked of rankest ingratitude. They had accepted Nancy and me as charity; charity we should have remained in the name of all decency. I looked across at Mr. Van Zant and hastily away again. He was dissected and quivering before my eyes. I felt very low myself. Things would never be the same again, no matter what their reaction was to my changed condition. They would drop us.

IV

"Well,"—Evans leaned over and blotted out the end of his cigarette,—"that is what happened."

"You don't mean," I interrupted, "that you never saw them again?"

Evans nodded.

"They never asked us again. Nancy and I have never laid eyes on them from that day to this."

"Oh, my Lord!" I leaned back in my chair and laughed until I was faint.

"When I had stood as much of the colonel's voice as I possibly could—he gave no one a chance to talk about anything else except Harrison Evans,

and you can imagine how I loved the sound of my name by that time—I signalled to Nancy, and we got up to go. We didn't get rid of him so easily though; he went with us. Tore himself away from the outstretched arms of the Van Zants and followed us to the sidewalk and around the block to our car. I don't know what he thought of us for parking it there. We took him down and dropped him in front of his blessed 'Follies'; we wouldn't go with him. Then Nancy and I went home. We felt that there had been a death in the family and we wanted to be alone to mourn."

"You didn't call?"

"No; we considered it, and decided not. We waited until the next year. We watched the mail feverishly; the invitation didn't come. It never came again."

"Are they still living?"

"I think so. Yes, they are still living, of course they are; they're deathless. Once a year they gather with Doctor Sciple, reduced to taking more pink pellets as time goes by, and the cultivated Miss Culver, in that drawing-room with its blue satin walls and the Aubusson carpet, and discuss the weather and their ailments. Nancy and I are never mentioned. Our brief little stay among them was a mistake and not to be discussed. It is something that has never been."

"Ah, you should write it," I said as Evans got to his feet preparatory to departing bedward: "you really should, my dear fellow!"

But Evans only shook his head as he bade me good-night.